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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 061524Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY MONROVIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9469
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS MONROVIA 001321

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STATE FOR AF/W-PDAVIS, INR/AA-BGRAVES

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: MOJ PLANS TO REDUCE PRISON POPULATION

REF: Monrovia 1285

1. SUMMARY: After the mass prison break in 2006 and the riot at Monrovia Central Prison (MCP) on October 20 (reftel) the Ministry of Justice is taking a hard look at reducing the prison population to improve security. This will be done through increasing resources, having a well-trained staff and better screening of the prison population. END SUMMARY.

2. In a meeting called by Minister of Justice Philip A.Z. Banks October 31 to improve conditions at the MCP following the recent riot, the Minister decided on a two-pronged plan to address the issue of overcrowding and security. The GOL will address the physical environment along with working with other stakeholders to develop a case management system of the prisoners already in MCP. The Minister said that the Ministry would put more resources into the MCP. Gasoline to transport the guards would be increased so that the prison could be fully staffed at all times. He will also review the rightsizing and retraining plan that his predecessor developed to improve the professionalism of the staff. Also attending the meeting were Solicitor General Tiawan Gongole, UNMIL Correction Advisory Unit head Marjo Calleghan, the MCP Superintendent, Justice Sector Support for Liberia (JSSL) representative John Dawson, JSSL member Shelia Weirth and PolOff.

3. Better management of the prison population will be addressed in two ways. The JSSL team has started a pilot program using law students to review the cases of prisoners at MCP. They began with the murder cases and will work on armed robbery, rape and aggravated assault in order. Minister Banks will assign a high level MOJ employee to work with the group. He will also direct the Liberian National Police to allow the group to see their case files. The group will present their findings to Minister Banks and recommend which prisoners should be released or scheduled for prosecution. The second way is for better screening of the prisoners before they enter the prison. This is to ensure that the prisoners are there with a jailable offense, that they have been charged and that the justice system knows where they are.

4. The current prison population at Monrovia Central Prison is now at 800 inmates. The prison was built to hold 200. According to UNMIL Correction Advisory Unit head Marjo Calleghan, only 1.8% of this population have been convicted of a crime, and are waiting to be transported to the new prison in Zwedru. The rest of the population are in pre-trial detention and are awaiting an initial court date. Minister of Justice Banks said that during a visit earlier this year there were 14 to 16 people in each cell on average. The Government of Liberia only has the ability to feed 50% of this population. NGOs, UN agencies and family members feed the other 50%.

5. COMMENT: MCP is a severely overcrowded prison located in downtown Monrovia (one mile from the U.S. Embassy) that has posed security risks in the past with mass break-outs and riots. The MOJ is looking to address this issue through improving staffing and better management of the prison population. Case management will allow the government to release prisoners on whom there is insufficient

evidence to convict as well as prisoners who have already served more time in pre-trial detention than a guilty verdict could give them. END COMMENT.

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